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Chronicling the Moves Of the Movement

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More than a hundred years ago, Herman Melville remarked that "youth is the time when hearts are large, and stirring wars appeal to the spirit which appeals in turn to the blade it draws."

If Melville had been in a position to observe it, he might have gone on at some length about the wars in our century that have engrossed young people and the causes that they have espoused. Bernard Shaw and, just now Alan Sillitoe, have told us that it really is a long way to Tipperary, and that if the draft age were 60 instead of 18, we might have a more peaceable planet.

THE YOUTH movements of this century cast considerable doubt on this attractive thesis. The Hitler Youth, the Young Communists League, the Red Guard in China and the Weathermen have more in common than is obvious at first blush. They all were — or are — viable instruments of political action, dedicated to the overthrow of some existing set of values, and animated by that particular fervent fanaticism that the young are so good at.

The Movement that grew up in this country during the 1960s was, of course, more than a youth movement. Laurence Leamer describes it as "an amorphous, variegated clan, whose only common link is allegiance to the heady pastiche of pot, peace, Panthers, rock, anti-war, anti-imperialism, anarchism and Marxism ... No one could possibly devise a structure to encompass this Movement. It would have to be a grand geodesic dome fitted together from pieces of Marx, Freud, Zen, Artaud, Kesey, Lenin, Leary, Ginsberg, Che, Gandhi, Marcuse, Laing, Fidel and Lao Tzu, strung with the black banners of anarchy to which the sayings of Chairman Mao have been neatly embroidered and with a 40-watt rock amplifier strapped to the top — a gaudy, mind-blowing spectacle and an impossible intellectual synthesis.

Leamer's book on the rise of the underground press is in a sense a history of the Movement. It is a somewhat limited sense, however. The underground press was largely the work of kids of middle-class backgrounds who presumably could, and during the next few years in most cases will, come to some sort of terms with society as it exists. The part of the Movement that most naturally renews and perpetuates itself is made up of people who have some legitimate complaint against society — blacks, for instance, or Chicanos — who see their best hope in political activism. It makes far better sense to be a Black Panther than a White Panther, and the Black Panthers don't really need an underground press.

THE PAPER REVOLUTIONARIES. The Rise of the Underground Press. By Laurence Leamer. Simon and Schuster. 220 pages. $8.95.

The underground press always has appealed primarily to members of the educated class and flourished where there is either a great university or a large cluster of colleges. Putting out a newspaper takes not only time but a certain irreducible minimum of cash at hand. This is one of the reasons that so many underground papers collapse after a couple of issues.

Another very strong contributing factor is that the unpaid or underpaid staff of these papers are extremely prone to quarreling among themselves. A splendid example of this tendency was offered to the world by the staff of the Berkeley Barb, one of the earliest and most successful of the papers. The founder of the Barb paid his employees $50 a week and pocketed the profits, which at one time were quite substantial. When the staff found out how very rich he was getting at their expense, they were understandably furious, split and founded a rival paper of their own devoted to a considerable degree to exposing the chicanery of the Barb's owner.

SINCE IN AN underground paper absolutely anything goes, there seems to be a gentlemen's (?) agreement that nobody is going to sue anybody for libel. In consequence, the most slanderous and unsupported allegations find their way into print. If you don't like what an underground paper says about you, the correct protocol is to found a paper of your own and blast back in kind. It doesn't seem to bother anybody in the least that in discrediting each other, the papers end up discrediting themselves.

Leamer points out that the spirit behind the underground press divides into two parts that may not be related at all. The cultural revolutionaries may or may not be political, though the political revolutionaries — most of them anarchists or Marxists of some stripe or other — are generally committed to the counter-culture. Underground papers may be directed to one group or the other, and some of them are most elegant typographically.

It may not be true that when you have seen one underground paper you've seen them all, but they all have certain similarities. The tone of the editorial material is usually shrill, the poetry and imaginative literature is usually pretty awful, and there are the ubiquitous dirty words which tend to be funnier and more effective in the classified advertising than in expository prose.

The unbridled freedom of speech in these papers has had a perceptible effect on straight journalism. An old friend of mine, the managing editor of The Atlantic until her retirment a couple of years ago, was so horrified at the material going into the magazine that she stopped sending subscriptions to her friends. Newspapers, most of them edited for family consumption, are more conservative than magazines, but most papers now publish words and phrases that would have been considered unprintable 20 years ago. This permissiveness may very well turn out to be the whole and complete legacy of the underground, and it now looks as if there may be nothing left of the underground but its legacy in a couple of years' time.

"THE PAPER Revolutionaries" is a captivating book — wry, charming, carefully researched. Unfortunately, it is already just a bit dated. Between the time the author had delivered his manuscript and the publishers had issued the finished product, the cultural climate had changed noticeably. The kids had stopped throwing deans out of their offices, and incidents such as the one where several hundred little maids from school (Barnard) threatened to strike because there wasn't enough soul food on the menu had become increasingly infrequent. Many of the early student rebels had grown up and were pushing middle age, and the tumultuous 1960s were too fresh a memory to evoke much nostalgia.

While it would be premature to say that the Movement, as it existed on college campuses, is dead, it is nonetheless perfectly obvious that it is not in radiant health. Whether it survives or simply peters out, it has found its historian in Laurence Leamer.